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ABSTRACT

Memorable language that delights children, makes them laugh or gasp, or causes them to ponder and wonder is the literature that will begin the process of teaching them to read and write. Literature is meant to connect, not with reason primarily, but with readers' and listeners' imaginations and emotions, and in the case of poetry, with something even more basic, their sense of rhythm. Although children may know how to read, whether they actually read or not depends on how early experiences with print have made them feel. Good stories can begin to teach children to read and to write simply because, if they are gripping enough, they will make them want to read them for themselves and eventually to write them. Good stories for children are those in which strong and interesting characters are involved in dramatic, adventurous, or humorous action. Another way literature can teach children how to read and write is through its predictable patterns and repetitions. The predictability and repetitions confirm a child's intuitions about how language works. The best stories, poems, and informational pieces will teach children to love what words can do, and to care about words is the first step in learning to read and write. (Twenty-three references are attached.) (JK)

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Only Connect: How Literature Teaches Children to Read and Write

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Only Connect: How Literature Teaches Children to Read and Write

What is literature? Like so many other words in English, "literature" has a confusing list of multiple meanings. The body of writings on a particular subject, the teaching of reading, say, is called literature. So are the leaflets and circulars of an advertising or political campaign. In fact, any writing in prose and poetry may be called literature.

However, when I speak of the literature that teaches children to read and write, I am talking about LITERATURE with a capital L. This to me is work of distinction, unique writings that exhibit excellence of form or expression. Genuine literature is art in words, created by those who care about words and how they are put together for the greatest effect on readers and listeners.

Whether the content deals with grand-scale subjects like War and Peace or everyday concerns like making friends or surviving in school, in literature with a capital L, we find expressed ideas of permanent or universal interest to humans of all ages and experience. As Ezra Pound (1960) wrote in ABC OF READING, "Literature is news that STAYS news."

In his effort to define this elusive term, Ezra Pound went on to say that "Literature is language charged with meaning, and that "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." In my view, literature is not so much charged with MEANING as with FEELING, because literature is meant to connect, not with the reason primarily, but with

readers' and listeners' imaginations and emotions, and in the case of poetry, with something even more basic, their sense of rhythm. This latter view of literature is important to those who help young children become literate.

With children, feeling comes first. Memorable language that delights them, makes them laugh or gasp, or causes them to ponder and wonder is the literature that will begin the process of teaching them to read and write. For, unless they encounter in print language that piques curiosity, stretches imagination, and exercises feelings as well as minds, children will be unlikely to turn from television to books for entertainment and information. They may know HOW to read, but whether they actually DO read or not depends on how early experiences with print have made them feel. Unless they have thrilled to words, children are likely to have little interest in reading and writing them.

Not all adult readers are writers, but it is safe to say that all adult writers were-and are- readers. Somewhere in their past is the story of how words in one setting or another cast a spell on them.

One of our foremost contemporary writers-poet, novelist and critic-John Updike, (1975) writes: "When I was thirteen, a magazine came into the house, THE NEW YORKER, by name, and I loved that magazine so much I concentrated all my wishing into an effort to make myself small and inky and intense enough to be received into its pages." Today John Updike's byline regularly appears on the prestigious NEW YORKER'S pages. His distinguished career as a writer began with reading and with love, love for words written with care and skill.

By way of illustrating how feeling comes first with children, I tried a simple exercise with four classes of second graders. Five paired pieces of writing were read aloud to the children, each pair consisting of both a text book or dictionary definition and a fictional or poetic description of the same process or phenomenon.

For example, I read as one pair the dictionary definition of a week and this piece about a week-long wait from Meindert De Jong's SHADRACH.

> And what is a week? Poof!
>
> And like that a week is gone by.
>
> Poof! There is a good week, and it is gone. But a week doesn't go by when you are waiting for a little black rabbit. Oh, a waiting week is long. It is eternity.

Another example of a pair was Eric Carle's dramatically innovative THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR and a text book ---a just-the-facts explanation of how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

When asked to indicate which piece they would like to hear a second time, 98% of the children chose the literary definition or explanation, the one with more appeal to the imagination and emotions than to the reason.

Try a similar exercise with young children. Read them pairs of poems, perhaps ruminative lyrics paired with verse featuring nonsense words or outlandish content. You are almost certain to find that children prefer what tickles their funny bones.

Furthermore, a good story, a narrative, has a magical, almost mystical attraction for most humans. In the movie, THE PRINCESS BRIDE, a television-bred boy, the skeptical and unwilling audience when his grandfather begins to

read to him, is drawn in spite of himself into a story of action, adventure, noble causes and strong characters.

Narratologists, who engage in narratology, the study of narrative, suggest that story is of utmost importance to the human experience. Barbara Hardy (1968) insists that stories are not so much art as a "primary act of mind." Some scholars believe that the human disposition to narrative is an essential aspect of our humanity. Jonathan Culler (1978) remarks, "We still do not appreciate as fully as we ought the importance of narrative schemes and models in all aspects of our lives." The narratologists seem to be saying that stories are essential to people as means of controlling, manipulating and ordering experience. "In order really to live," Barbara Hardy (1968) says, "we make up stories about ourselves and others."

Certainly there are few of us who can resist a good story. And good stories, in print, can begin to teach children to read and to write simply because, if they are gripping enough, they will make them want to read them for themselves and, although it may to most seem more difficult than reading, to eventually write them.

Good stories for children are those in which strong and interesting characters, preferably children themselves, are involved in dramatic, adventurous or humorous action. Good stories stay good over time, like favorite folktales: "The Three Little Pigs," "Rumpelstiltskin," "The Gingerbread Boy" and such tales as WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE, MRS. FRISBY AND THE RATS OF NIMH, DEAR MR. HENSHAW, MR. POPPER'S PENGUINS AND THE PUSHCART WAR. You can add a dozen of your own old favorites to the list and study the pages of THE HORN BOOK or SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL to find new ones.

Another way literature can teach children how to read and write is through its predictability. Language is highly predictable and certain types

of literature, verse and books that contain repetition and rhyme, emphasize this predictability in highly pleasurable ways. In THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR, for example, there is extensive use of repetitive statements, with word substitutions:

On Monday, he ate through one apple.
But he was still hungry.
On Tuesday, he ate through two pears.
But he was still hungry.

The story continues through the days of the week, with the food and the number changing, but the sentence pattern remaining the same. The story is highly predictable and therefore easily read by beginning readers.

Folktales like "Henny Penny" and "The Little Red Hen" and verse like "This Old Man" and "Seven Little Rabbits" are just a few examples of predictable texts that are not only easy to read but also delightful and satisfying. Their predictability confirms a child's intuitions about how language works, as educator Bill Martin first showed us years ago in his excellent SOUNDS OF LANGUAGE series, a series well worth looking into if you haven't encountered it before.

A folktale, a verse or a book like THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR teach children to read through repetition of words and phrases, a technique experts advise for beginning readers, but genuine literature repeats itself with wit and charm, unlike much of the pedestrian, written-for -an instructional purpose prose of many basal readers.

Dolores Durkin (1966) in the United States and Margaret Clarke (1976) in Great Britain both conducted extensive studies on children who read early,

often without any direct instruction. These researchers discovered that early, pleasurable encounters with literature, particularly stories and verse, was a major factor in helping these children to learn to read. Children who read early were those who had access from the beginning to books and who engaged in activities in which they experimented with reading and writing in as natural a way as they learned to speak.

Another researcher, Gordon Wells, (1981) later corroborated Clarke's and Durkin's findings and also discovered that experience with books during the preschool years is related to successful literary development in the elementary school years. For teachers who love reading and want their pupils to love it, too, this is not surprising news.

They know that reading and writing begins with love for words. But the basal-reader industry on which reading instruction has been based for several decades is not quick to acknowlege love of words as part of the process of learning to read. Reading has become a slow and deadly march through banal material where vocabulary is controlled and the so-called skills of reading are introduced in arbitrary order, the order differing depending upon which reading "expert" superintended the reading series.

Accompanying basal readers are workbooks of reading-related exercises apparently designed to take the joy out of reading and to take away from children time that could be spent poring over pages of real books like FROG AND TOAD ARE FRIENDS or SIGN OF THE BEAVER. Certainly the basal reader does not make children love words; only the art of literature can do that.

Real books can teach children to read and write by making them familiar with the conventions associated with print. Little children, enjoying books with a parent or teacher, joyfully discover how books work. They learn that you read them from front to back, that you read from top to bottom of the page

and right to left along the lines.

They learn, by hearing books read aloud, that print and speech relate in a specific way, that books are to enjoy and learn from, that print holds stories and messages one can turn to again and again.

Language in print involves conventions that children can only become familiar with through direct experience. Stories, for example, have patterns or shapes. Typically they begin with a character who is faced with a problem or situation that must be solved or altered. The story is the working out of the problem to a satisfactory conclusion or resolution.

In WHISTLE FOR WILLIE, Peter's problem is that he wants to learn to whistle; the story shows how he eventually, after several attempts, is able to whistle for his dog. If children read and hear enough stories, they become familiar with story conventions naturally. Good stories are well-constructed; they proceed with inevitability at a swift pace. A good story compels readers to keep turning pages; there is a compulsion to see how the problem is solved, how things turn out in the end.

The conventional shape of the story helps the reader learn to read it and other stories that have the same pattern or form. Experience with stories teaches writing, too, because in them, particularly those which are most conventional, like folk tales, are the blueprints for constructing new stories.

Language is set out in dozens of conventional forms that help to teach reading and writing. Conventions lead to predictability, and we have already discussed how predictability helps with reading. The conventional form of the friendly letter helps us to give form to our ideas; the pattern of the limerick helps us to read it and provides a form for writing new limericks.

All forms of literature are important in teaching children to read and

write. Although story and verse seem to be closer to the child's pre-formal operational level of development, other literary forms, each with their own conventions, are equally important, and children need to be introduced to them. From about 11 or 12 on, children are capable of more advanced , more abstract mental operations. They are better able to understand abstractions like form and structure and can begin to consider them apart from content.

Plays, editorials, books reviews, informational pieces, and articles, which, like the old-fashioned essay, present an educated personal opinion on a topic, all these have their own conventions and may be read for enjoyment and emulated in children's own writing.

For instance, children are surely better off writing book reviews than book reports, those artificial school-type writings that kill with one blow the desire to read and write. Good book reviews, on the other hand, are interesting to read. They are personal evaluative discussions of the content and intent of a book and they are intended for the enlightenment of others. Good examples of them, examples that children can read for themselves, may be found in HORN BOOK, SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL or the newspaper.

Here is a book review written by Ryan, a first grader:

My book was THE SNOWY DAY. It tells about a boy who saw snow the first time. The pictures tell what happens. He walks in the snow and gets hit on the head by it and his snowball melts in his pocket and he made angels in the snow. This is a true book because that is what you do in snow.

How much better this review is than a sterile report that sets down answers to one teacher's questions on this book: What time of year is it in this story? What did Peter see when he looked out his window? How many things did Peter do in the snow? What do you think Peter had for breakfast? and so on.

All by himself, Ryan wrote a review, a personal response, that gave the

content of the book with an insightful comment that the pictures told the story. At the end is an evaluative statement based upon personal experience. If a first grader can do so well, think of the fine reviews fifth and sixth graders will write to influence others to read their favorite books.

Children in one fifth grade studied the conventions of predictable books by reading them to children in first grade. To select books for reading aloud, they read many predictable books, and in the process not only learned how to read them but how to write them. Here is Aislinn's predictable book:

This color is dark blue (This was written in dark blue)
And this is a triangle. (Picture of a triangle)
So this is a dark blue triangle. (Picture of a triangle colored dark blue.)

The book continues through several shapes and colors:

This color is red.
And this is a circle.
So this is a red circle.

A fourth grade class had written many stories at the beginning of the year. Their teacher decided to try an experiment. If she read a selected group of folk tales to the children over time and let the children describe how these tales were written, would the patterns and motifs of the stories be used in the children's writing of tales? She found that her class's story writing improved dramatically during and after the reading of the tales which are, as I mentioned earlier, blueprints for the fiction that follows them.

Here is Christina's story of Tom Quick and Bill Pokey:

Once upon a time Tom Quick was at school showing off his new red sports car to all his friends. He was bragging about how fast his car went.

Tom told everyone that his new car could beat any other car in a race. Just as Tom finished, Bill Pokey came driving up in his old beat-up piece of junk car. When he came down the street Tom and his friends started teasing him about his car. Bill stopped the car and got out and said to Tom, "I bet my old piece of junk car could beat your sports car in a race". So they agreed to have a race around town.

The race started. Tom took off very fast and Bill's car was very slow. Tom was so far down the road that he couldn't see Bill's car anymore. As he passed by McDonalds he saw some of his friends. He stopped and said to himself, "I'll win the race so I have time for a hamburger." When he stopped he started talking to his friends about the race. Tom told his friends that he had plenty of time because he was so sure he would win the race.

Tom was having such a good time with his friends that he lost track of the time and didn't see Bill drive by. Tom noticed the time and said "I better go!! I think I've been here too long!" He got in his car and drove away very fast.

When Tom got to the finish line Bill was already there. Bill was laughing at Tom and said, "I told you I could beat you !

Literature grows out of other literature. The works of the greatest, most innovative writers like Maurice Sendak and William Steig are direct descendants of earlier literature. Echoes of old folktales are heard in their work, in OUTSIDE OVER THERE, in CALEB AND KATE, in PIERRE and DOMINIC.

The marvelous mad verse of Edward Lear and Ogen Nash are the ancestors of the thoroughly modern and equally mad works of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelustsky.

Literature teaches us to read and write, first by captivating us. And it must be good to do that. It must appeal to the emotions and the imagination, give words to feelings about human experience that we may have felt but couldn't express.

When we are beginning to read, literature teaches us through its predictable patterns and repetitions. As we gain experience with more and more literature of all types or modes, we gradually become familiar with the conventions of each form. Once we become familiar with these forms and their conventions, we can make them our own, use them for telling our own stories, composing our own poems, writing our own essays, creating our own plays.

The body of genuine literature is vast, rich in its many types and styles and forms of language. Why try to teach children to read and write with bogus books when the real thing is vital and alive and readily available? Give children genuine literature and they will make the necessary connections. The best stories, poems, and informational pieces will teach children to love what words can do. To care about words is the first step in learning to read and write.

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